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# The role of brand reputation in organic food consumption: A behavioral reasoning perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of brand reputation in influencing organic food consumption. Specifically, we adopted the behavioral reasoning theory framework and examined the mechanisms by which consumers' values affect their attitude and intention to consume organic food under varying levels of brand reputation. To test the theoretical framework, we recruited 617 respondents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk) platform. The analysis found general support for the application of behavioral reasoning theory in the organic food consumption context. The results revealed that the relationship between consumer values and attitude is partially (fully) mediated by consumer reasoning in low (high) brand reputation conditions.

## 1. Introduction

The consumption of organic food has grown exponentially worldwide in the past decade (Rana and Paul, 2017). Consequently, studies on the drivers of organic food consumption have attracted increasing interest from scholars and practitioners alike. Previous studies on this topic have examined the socio-psychological drivers of organic food consumption, such as health awareness, concerns over animal welfare, and concerns over the societal and environmental impacts of food sourcing and processing (Magnusson et al., 2003; Padel and Foster, 2005; Pearson et al., 2011; Rana and Paul, 2017). While the availability of organic food products in local supermarkets has increased in recent years, there is a gap in the marketing literature regarding the driving factors of organic food consumption, particularly from a branding perspective (Richetin et al., 2016). Indeed, "there is a pressing need to discuss the marketing and retailing activities related to organic food" (Rana and Paul, 2017, p.162).

While the importance of brands in affecting food consumption in general has been examined in the literature (Anselmsson et al., 2014; Sjostrom et al., 2014), few studies have examined the role of brand reputation in organic food consumption. This is an important research gap because the effects of branding on consumers' general food consumption may not be generalizable to the organic food context. For example, if a consumer has a favorable attitude towards a specific food brand, he/she may not necessarily have a positive attitude towards consuming organic food launched by the company under the same brand. Therefore, brands may decide to launch a sub-brand to enter the organic food market (Horovitz, 2003). It is therefore the interest of this study to examine how brand reputation interacts with other socio-psychological drivers of organic food consumption (i.e. values and reasons) in influencing consumers' attitude and intention to consume organic food.

The aim of this study was to develop a theoretical framework for organic food consumption on the basis of behavioral reasoning theory (hereafter BRT) (Westaby, 2005; Claudy et al., 2013). BRT suggests that an individual's behavior is influenced by a person's reasoning, which in turn affects his or her values, attitudes, intentions and behavior (Westaby, 2005). Specifically, this study makes two contributions to the body of literature. First, this study examined the mechanisms by which consumer values affect attitude and intention to consume organic food, through the mediating role of consumer reasoning. While the BRT has been employed in prior studies (e.g. Claudy et al., 2015; Westaby, 2005) to examine the relationship between values and attitude, no studies have examined the mediating role of consumer reasoning (i.e. 'reasons for' and 'reasons against') in this relationship. Second, the study examines whether the relationship between values, reasoning,

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and attitude are consistent across low and high brand reputation conditions. The examination of these boundary conditions is important as it helps researchers and practitioners alike to understand the role of branding in affecting the drivers of organic food consumption.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Behavioral reasoning theory

Prior studies have examined organic food consumption from a diverse theoretical lens, including the Theory of Planned Behavior, Theory of Reasoned Action (Thøgersen and Ölander, 2006; Maloney et al., 2014; Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2005; Paul et al., 2016), Attitude-Behavior-Context Theory (Zepeda and Deal, 2009), Means End Choice model (Zanoli and Naspetti, 2002), and Sequential Process Model (Sierra et al., 2015). While these theories have their merits in explaining organic food consumption, they did not take into account the barriers of organic food consumption in their conceptual framework. Incorporating barriers to consumption within a theoretical framework is important as it allows researchers to test the different thought mechanisms through which consumers form their attitudes and intention (Westaby, 2005). Hence, this study adopts BRT as a theoretical foundation as it incorporates both the driving factors (i.e. reasons for) and the barriers (i.e. reasons against) to explain consumer behavior.

BRT suggests that a person's reasoning influences global motives and intentions because “they [the reasons] help individuals justify and defend their action, which promotes and protects their self-worth” (Westaby, 2005, p.98). BRT has three main advantages over alternative theories previously used to explain organic food consumption, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior and Theory of Reasoned Action. First, BRT allows researchers to identity apparent reasons for and against adopting a particular product or service, before testing the relative influence of these reasons on consumer attitudes and adoption behavior. This is an important mechanism, as research suggests that “reasons for and against adoption are not just opposites of each other, but they are qualitatively distinct constructs which influence consumers' adoption decisions in different ways” (Claudy et al., 2015, p.539). The second advantage of BRT is that it examines reasons that are context-specific. While other frameworks (e.g. Theory of Planned Behavior, Theory of Reasoned Action) evaluate consumers' general beliefs about a certain product, the research grounded in BRT identifies and evaluates reasons in a specific product context (Tudor et al., 2007; Westaby et al., 2010). Finally, BRT allows researchers to test different cognitive routes (via ‘reasons for’ and ‘reasons against’) in consumers' adoption decisions. Because of these advantages, recent studies in marketing have utilized the BRT framework to explain consumer behavior in various contexts, such as innovation adoption (Claudy et al., 2015), charitable giving (Arli and Lasmono, 2015; Chatzidakis et al., 2016), urban bicycle commuting (Claudy and Peterson, 2014), and adoption of mobile banking (Gupta et al., 2017). Overall, these prior studies suggest that BRT serves as a coherent framework for predicting consumer attitude, intention, and behavior.

On the basis of BRT, this study proposes that consumer values will influence reasoning (H1a, H1b) and attitudes (H2), which both directly and indirectly influence consumers' adoption intentions (H3a, H3b, H4). Specifically, the study suggests that consumer values will determine more ‘reasons for’, and fewer ‘reasons against’ the consumption of organic food, and that consumer reasoning will mediate the role of consumer values and attitudes towards organic food (H5a, H5b). It was also proposed that the relationship between consumer values, reasoning and attitudes is moderated by brand reputation (H6a, H6b, H7a, H7b). The following section presents the theoretical justification for the linkage between each construct in the conceptual framework.

### 2.2. Research hypotheses

#### 2.2.1. Values → Reasoning

Values are cognitive patterns that individuals use to guide them when evaluating and responding to people, issues, and phenomenon (Schwartz et al., 2000). Marketing researchers have long understood the importance of values in affecting consumer behavior (Baker et al., 2004; Szmigin et al., 2007). For example, Goldsmith et al. (1995) found that social values such as warm relations with others, excitement, and self-respect are positively associated with attitudes towards snacking and convenience food. Bigné-Alcañiz et al. (2009) found that consumers with strong altruistic values use altruistic attribution when forming their judgment of the credibility of CRM messages. Consequently, organizations have attempted to develop their offerings in line with the values of their target audience (Boyle, 2003; Lin, 2002).

BRT proposes that the deep-rooted values of consumers will influence their reasoning (Westaby, 2005). Indeed, reasoning and values can help to explain why people choose to behave in a certain way (Myyry et al., 2009). Reasoning refers to the process used by an individual to determine his/her course of action (Myyry et al., 2009). Lockie et al. (2002) found that consumers' values influence their reasoning when choosing organic food. Indeed, Westaby's (2005) argument of the linkage between values and reasons has received empirical support from recent studies in the marketing literature (see Claudy et al., 2013, 2015).

Previous studies show that a consumer's decision to purchase organic food products is driven by his/her values relating to health, environmental protection, and animal welfare (Baker et al., 2004; Honkanen et al., 2006; Arvola et al., 2008). Given that these deep-rooted consumer values will influence consumption decisions, we propose that consumer values would affect consumer reasoning for and against consuming organic food. We propose that consumers who place high importance on certain values, such as respect for other creatures, belief in nature and care for future generations (see Baker et al., 2004), are likely to have stronger (weaker) reasons for (against) consuming organic food. Thus:

**H1a.** Consumer values will positively influence their reasons for consuming organic food

**H1b.** Consumer values will negatively influence their reasons against consuming organic food.

#### 2.2.2. Values → Attitudes

Previous research shows widespread agreement that one's personal values will play a role in predicting his/her attitudes and behaviors (De Barcellos et al., 2014). Although values are defined as the way in which people are guided to behave, De Boer et al. (2007) suggest that values may indirectly influence behavior through attitude.

BRT suggests that a person's reasoning does not occur separately from his/her values (Claudy et al., 2013). The existing theoretical frameworks in the psychology literature, such as the value-belief-norm theory (Schwartz, 1977), show that consumers activate their values when justifying a particular behavior. Researchers also argue that a product will be more readily adopted by consumers if they perceive the product to be consistent with their personal values (Claudy et al., 2013). Attitudes are considered as global motives because they constitute a broad substantive factor, which consistently predicts intention and behavior across different domains (Westaby, 2005). Other behavioral theories, such as the Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2012), have also provided evidence that consumer values serve as key determinants of their attitudes. Values function as an important decision-maker, as they shape how consumers form their attitude towards a product/service. In an organic food context, consumer attitudes can be directly influenced by their values (Dreezens et al., 2005). Therefore: